

Film as a Mirror of History, Ideology and Individual Freedom

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Course Description:

This lively and original course is open to students who have an interest in studying the social, political and cultural transitions in Central Europe through an understanding of its cinema, from masterpieces of Czechoslovak New Wave to the contemporary fiction and documentaries.

The main goal of the course is to unveil the complexities hidden behind the clichés of communist and post-communist societies and define the phenomena of the transition of the individual human mind as a consequence of political changes. Central Europe, its changing borders, and its dynamic and violent 20th century, is a deep and surprising source of knowledge and inspiration. Among other things, it says a lot about identity and otherness.

In this course, students with diverse backgrounds in political science, ethnography, sociology, or literature will join in lively discussions on the themes that emerge from the films and reveal the dynamics of society. This is not a traditional film course: we will not analyze films purely as works of art. We will focus on the films' social, political, cultural and historical contexts.

Films produced behind the Iron Curtain were not considered commercial products. They were instruments of artistic expression and ideology, and also of protest and testimony. The stories of the Czech, Slovak, Polish and Hungarian film industries – the fate and the moral dilemmas of their most talented artists and their specific and strong film language before and after the political changes in Europe of 1989 – will be a discovery for those seeing the films for the first time (as well as for those already familiar with them but who wish to enlarge their knowledge).

We will analyze the questions of national and cultural identity of inhabitants in multicultural Central Europe. Furthermore, we will explore the specific conditions of film production in “state owned” film industries under communist rule.

Finally, we will consider the moral and artistic dilemmas of artists working in totalitarian societies, as well as the general position of intellectuals in the post-communist development. We will also study the contemporary arthouse scene of post-communist Europe. The films can help us to understand not only the mindset of the artist, but the mentality of the whole society.

Grading Policy:

The goal of the course is to gain a better understanding of communist reality and post-communist development through the individual eyes of the best filmmakers. Our students come from diverse backgrounds, therefore both class activities and personal research play important roles.

Grading is as follows:

- **20%** - Student participation and activity during and between classes
- **20%** - Mid-term Exam is under the form of the test. The test is delivered to students 5 days before the deadline.
- **60%** - Final Paper. The final paper is the most important outcome of this course. Personal guidance in the research phase of the paper is provided by the instructor.

Mandatory Completion Policy

Note that all mandatory assignments and exams must be completed to the best of your ability in order for your final grade to be issued. Failure to complete a mandatory assignment or exam may result in a failing grade.

Letter Grade	Percentage	Description
A+	97-100	Excellent Work
A	93-97	Outstanding Work
A-	90-92	
B+	87-89	Good work
B	83-86	
B-	80-82	
C+	77-79	Acceptable Work
C	73-76	
C-	70-72	
D+	67-69	Work that is significantly below average
D	63-66	
D-	60-62	
F	0-59	Work that does not meet the minimum standards for passing the course

AEP Academic Integrity Policy

Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are not tolerated. The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for the development of knowledge and learning is encouraged at many stages of the learning process. While we value technology for educational purposes, we also value originality and the retainment of knowledge, and thus using AI for assignments and examinations, even if rephrased, is strictly prohibited and considered an academic integrity violation, unless the instructor explicitly allows for it in the context of evaluated work

AEP Non-Discrimination/Harassment Policy

The AEP program in Prague promotes a diverse learning environment where the dignity, worth, and differences of each individual are valued and respected. Discrimination and harassment, whether based on a person's race, gender, sexual orientation, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, or other legally protected characteristics, are repugnant and completely inconsistent with our objectives. Retaliation against individuals for raising good faith claims of harassment and/or discrimination is prohibited.

AEP Diversity Policy

AEP is committed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming community that values diversity in all its forms. We believe that one of the most meaningful lessons of studying abroad is learning to navigate and appreciate differences with curiosity and an open mind. While engaging across differences can sometimes be challenging or uncomfortable, these moments are essential for growth and learning. We recognize that every member of our community, even with the best intentions, may occasionally make missteps. Our commitment is to provide a supportive environment where respectful and honest dialogue helps us learn from these experiences, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive and broaden their perspective.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1

CEE Introductory Lecture Series

AEP Introductory Lecture Series

Week 2

Confidantes and Their Heirs (The legacy of secret political police and informers in postcommunist society)

Film: *Kawasaki's Rose* by Jan Hřebejk, CZ 2010 (Kawasakiho růže)

Topic of the class: *In communist countries, between 1945 -1989, hundreds of thousands of citizens were caught in the web of the political police. They became informers. They denounced their friends, lovers, and neighbors. Kawasaki's Rose is the real story of a respected psychiatrist and former dissident who tried to hide his past. Is he a victim, is he guilty, or both? The film is key in understanding the present moral trauma of post-communist societies.*

Enlarged reading for Moodle:

One of the constants in the lives of people living beyond the Iron Curtain was the presence and active meddling of the secret police and its informers. This spider web was established after World War II with help from Soviet counselors, incorporating some of the very agents who had previously actively served the Gestapo in their respective countries. In Central European countries, the process involved hundreds of thousands of people from 1945 to 1989. Some of them—out of conviction or sheer careerism—voluntarily became secret police officers. Others were caught in their nets and became informers, denouncers, or victims. Some of these people had signed a deed of collaboration, but others denounced without a formal deal. Many of them were being blackmailed by the secret police, still others were being paid.

In former Czechoslovakia only, one hundred and twenty thousand documented informers and collaborators were caught in the net of the State Security (“StB”). And thousands of personal files more were destroyed at the behest of the Soviet KGB shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The secret police had fulfilled its goal of completely annihilating individual dignity and mutual trust out in the public, thereby undermining the society's will to oppose the dictatorship.

This system continues to be a staple of all dictatorships and leads to all-pervasive fear and feelings of guilt. What is typical of it is that the consequences of enforced denouncement span not only the lifetime of the dictatorship, but they also affect at least the two following generations. The first free generation is appalled at their parents' mindset; the next one deems it utterly incomprehensible. The main problem is that sometimes (though not always), it is impossible to distinguish the perpetrator from the victim, the denouncer from the one being denounced. Some people, unbeknownst to them, played both roles simultaneously.

When a dictatorship falls, the denouncers have usually no interest in talking about their actions, and the victims are seldom listened to. When decades later the truth outs, not only are personal human relationships shaken, but the whole society is. The legacy of denunciation and the secret police continues to belong among the unresolved traumas of Central European countries and survives in each and every family.

Kawasaki's Rose was filmed by well-known Czech director Jan Hřebejk, a member of the middle-aged generation for whom the question of their parents' past is especially poignant. It is the story of a man who is honest in principle and would probably hold his own in a free civil society. Yet in a totalitarian regime, he is faced with the question of the boundaries between honor and evil. Although formally, the film appears to be light and accessible, it gives a broader interpretation of denunciation as a danger latently present in every individual's fate

Week 3

The State as a Film Producer

Films: Examples (show reels)

- Historical drama and ideology - Jan Hus by Otakar Vávra (1951)
- Musical comedy - Green Gold by Ladislav Rychman (1963) ; "Diamonds of the Night" by Jan Nemeč

Topic of the class: The nationalization of film industries in Central and Eastern Europe after World War II. From film industry business to the Instrument of Ideology and then to Czech New Wave. Postwar generation od "Rebels without a cause."

“The most important of the arts for us is film”, said V.I. Lenin before nationalizing the film industry in the Soviet Union and creating from it an instrument of communist ideology. But in Czechoslovakia, the “nationalization” of the flourishing film industry in 1945 was not simply ideologically-driven by communist politics. In the beginning, it was a non-ideological economic project shaped by film professionals. How could such a film industry structure function in the postwar period? Subsequently, ideological rules were applied to film production and killed all creativity for years. At the beginning of the 1960s, new trends emerged – the “Czech Film Miracle” and the “Czechoslovak New Wave”. The Czech New Wave directors found themselves in a complete paradox: They made films, which criticized the very state and system which produced and paid for the films, and which employed and paid the directors.

Reading:

Peter Hames, - Czech and Slovak Cinema: Theme and Tradition, Peter Hames – Czechoslovak New Wave

Week 4

USA the Dream Land - The role of collective and private memory

Films:

- Sample of 20 min: **Lemonade Joe** by Oldrich Lipsky, 1963
- **See you in Denver** by Jan Sikel. From the project **Private Centuries**.

Topic of the class: During the Cold War, relations between Western and Eastern Europeans were diminished. But relations between “easterners” and US citizens were forbidden. In this isolation, many people developed a picture of the U.S. as a “dreamland,” a mythical kingdom of freedom and justice. American Westerns, in particular, became symbolic of escape and victory. The documentarian Jan Šikl explores this topic through family film archives. His documentary tells the story of an ordinary Prague family of cinema owners who become victims of the regime, demonstrating how even the twisted symbols of American Westerns became important in the battle for ideological control.

Week 5

Mediating East and West in the Beautiful Nineties

Film: *The Double Life of Veronique* by Krzysztof Kieszlowski (1991)

Related films: *Red, Blue, White, or Decalogue* – Kieszlowski

Topic of the class: When the Cold War ended in 1989, joy, optimism and new spiritual trends invaded most European countries. Many “westerners” and “easterners” looked at each other as long-lost siblings. But the gap between the mentality and life experience of a divided Eastern and Western Europe was larger than imagined. Krzysztof Kieslowski was one of the rare filmmakers who reflected the new situation in his late films, mainly in “Veronique.” He observes a reality impossible to capture in scholarly texts in his search for artistic truth.

Optional films

- *Knife in the Water* by Roman Polanski. 1965
- *Popiol i diamante (Ashes and diamond)* – by Andrzej Wajda, or *Man of Marble* by Andrzej Wajda, *The Mug*.

Reading

- Stok, Danusia: *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*. London Faber 1995

Week 6

Transition of Family and Gender Roles in roles in Communist and Postcommunist Europe

Film: *Strnadovi* by Helena Třeštíková, 2019

Related films - show reels, *Apple Game*, *Daisies*, by Vera Chytilova, 1978, *Matrimonial Pieces*,

Topic of the class: The social status of women and family values in communist Europe were different from the rest of Europe: All women were either working or studying. After the Soviet Occupation in 1968, the government in Czechoslovakia started to promote a generous family policy, in order to keep citizens away from political rebellion. The housing crisis accentuated the difficulties of balancing motherhood and a profession. Helena Třeštíková followed five couples and families over a period of 20 years. Her film is a fascinating testimony of everyday life “before” and “after” the fall of communism. “Match Making Mayor” is a tragi-comic documentary about a Slovak village, where surprisingly people prefer to remain single. Is this phenomenon in fact proof of a successfully functioning society? Or does it represent a collapse of family values?

Optional

- *Pupendo* by Jan Hřebejk, CZ 2003

Reading

- Heitlinger, Alena. "Women's Equality, Work, and Family in the Czech Republic." Family, Women, and Employment in Central and Eastern Europe. Ed. Barbara Lobodzinska. pp. 86-96. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1995

Midterm test

Week 7

Outsiders and Losers as Heroes - and What means to be young in totalitarian system

Film: Closely Watched Trains by Jiri Menzel, 1966

The topic of the class: In most minds, a hero is someone who is famous and well known for his heroic deeds. Someone, who is the winner. But in unfree society, heroes often live and die as without recognition. Some are heroes for heroic deeds as well. But others are heroes just because they are able live in unfree society in dignity and to find their indestructible inner freedom.

Probably the most complex expression of the principle of "outsider as a hero" is the good Soldier Svejek by Jaroslav Hasek. The very best work on this field in cinema was probably done by artistic tandem of writer Bohumil Hrabal and director Jiri Menzel.

Closely Watched Trains was Menzel's most realized and coherent narrative, including stories and observations involving 22-year-old Milos Hrma, a signalman at a rural railway station in the last days of the Second World War. Hrma embodies the Czechoslovakian fondness for the "little man who seems to wander cheerfully into large historical events" (as critic James Woods puts it) exemplified by The Good Soldier Svejek. This is one of the most cherished Czechoslovak films of the 1960s. Ostře Sledované Vlaky (1966) was the recipient of the 1968 Oscar for Best Foreign Film. Similarly, this feature-film debut of director Jiří Menzel is also celebrated at home as a milestone of cinema, and as one of the key films of the Czechoslovak New Wave.

Week 8

Transition to the consuming society

Film: Czech dream - 2004, (Klusák - Remunda)

The topic of the class: The consuming society is a product of the free market. For a long time. Western societies believed that free market and democracy are coming hand in hand. How was the birth of consuming society related to entering of post-communist countries in EU in 2004? The film Czech Dream captures the moment of newly born commercial mentality after the political changes of 1989. As the culture of super-markets evolved in post-Communist countries, their citizens involuntarily participated in a “reality show” created by two courageous filmmakers.

Week 9

Jewisness as a symbol

Film: “*Distant Journey*” by Alfred Radok, 1949

The topic of the class: In the beginning of the 20th century, most German and Czech Jews in Austria became mostly totally assimilated with mainstream society. Regardless of their language (Czech or German), Jews in the modern Czechoslovak state after World War I voluntarily became Czechoslovak citizens with no mention of their religion in their documents. Many children learned their otherness only when they were forced to wear yellow stars after the Nazi occupation. Radok’s film is the first postwar movie about the holocaust in a global context. It tells the story of mixed families that fell into the Nazi trap – the famous Terezin ghetto or the resistance movement. Because of the anti-Semitism of communist Czechoslovakia, the film was banned for almost 40 years.

Reading:

- Jacob Edelstein by Ruth Bondy

Optional

- “The Shop on Main Street” by Kadar and Klos, 1965

Week 10

The “Gypsy Question” - The Postwar Tragedy of the Roma People

Film: *The Gypsy* (Cigán) by Martin Šulík, 2007

The topic of the class: The fate of Roma (“Gypsy”) communities in Central and Eastern Europe is a sensitive point in the transition from totalitarianism to democracy. Hundreds of thousands of central and eastern European Romas in varying living conditions are children of parents who were forcefully integrated into mainstream society. This integration has stripped Romas of their language, home, and dignity. The film “Marian” by Petr Vaclav is an existential study of one such mistreated individual who can no longer connect to and live integrated in this mainstream society, and so becomes a bewildered animal. Today’s animosity between Roma communities and mainstream society can be understood as an echo of past heritage.

Related films:

- *Marian* by Petr Václav
- *Brats* (Smradi) by Zdenek Tyc, 2005

Week 11

Disabled Society in Transition

The Film: *Two Roads*, documentary by Radoslav Síbrt, 2018

The topic of the class: The equal starting possibility for all citizen is the basic element of democratic society. During communist time, most people of soviet bloc were never confronted with physical or mental disability of the others. People with handicap lived in special institutions, hidden from the eyes of the others. From 1990, these countries learn how to build a public with equal access for everyone.

About the film: What would you do, if you knew that you have a limited time ahead of you? Much shorter than an average life? Members of The Tap Tap - a music band made up of physically disabled - or rather crippled as they would call themselves - students of Jedlička Institute in Prague have a pretty clear idea. They want to live and enjoy every single minute of it. The Tap Tap orchestra shows how to confront difficulties and obstacles. Above all, how to have fun in your life. The members of the

band are strong personalities with a direct attitude to life. They drink, smoke, curse, love, as long as they enjoy it. The film explores the spirit of survival and the wild lust for life against all the odds.

Week 12

Animation

Animation Spiritual Rescue, Handcraft, and Play: Trnka, Švankmajer, Zeman and contemporary animation

- **Films:** Perak and SS or Galina Vogelbirdae “Documentary about Jiri Trnka.” “The Hand” by Jiri Dimension of Dialogues by Jan Švankmajer; *Something from Alice* by Jan Švankmajer

Modern Czech and Slovak animation

Diana van Nguyen (*Little one*), Kateřina Karhánková *Fruits of the clouds*

The topic of the class: State ownership of the film industry created a unique phenomenon: generously-funded animations for children and festival audiences. Among other legendary eastern animation studios, the Prague Bratři v triku had a symbolic history: It was founded by Nazi Germans, later flourished under communist rule, and at the end collapsed in freedom under the dictate of capitalist free markets and developments in technology. The names of the leading figures –Trnka, Švankmajer - are the keys to understanding the nature of this art form as well as how these world-famous studios functioned.

Week 13

Next generation

Film: *Silent Land* by Agata Wozzynska.

The topic of the class: Contemporary filmmakers of middle and young generation did not live the traumatic experience of their parents... Still, they have trouble to deal with its heritage. In the film, the percent couple on Italian holiday refuses to accept any kind of reality: the break of their relationship, the problems of the island, where boats with refugees probably daily land, where local people live in the shadow of the fear from future. Is it possible to understand the past and situation of “the others?” The author of the film says: “My film is about the condition of thirty-something Europeans, their emotional isolation and moral confusion. It is a tale of alienation – not just from each other but also from the world, about conformity and passivity, when the need for safety and

convenience turns into a strategy for survival. I wanted to show, albeit not in a literal way, how the whole world remains blind to the tragedy of the immigrants.”

Optional class:

Remembering Germans

Week 8

Victory or Lost? Remembering Germans

Sample: “*King of Velichovky*” by Jan Šikl, 2005, from the project *Private century*

- Portrayal of wealthy german landowner in idyllic atmosphere of prewar Czechoslovakia

Film: “*Adelheid*” by František Vlácil, 1969,

The topic of the class: Was it ethnic cleansing or the only way to guarantee peace in Europe? An act of justice or violent vengeance? In 1945, 10 million ethnic Germans were forced to leave their homes in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania. This changed the ethnic and cultural map of Europe. The forced resettlement of Germans was partly executed by bewildered local people and sometimes included atrocities. However, the German settlement in Central Europe was not related to the Nazi occupation: in some cases, German settlements were more than 1000 years old. Ironically, Central European cultures evolved from a broad German background. The director František Vlácil dedicated his life’s work to the duality of strong bonds and antagonism between Czechs and Germans. His film *Adelheid* is a window into the postwar atmosphere in Central Europe.